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ABSTRACT

The determinants of widows' attitudes toward women were investigated, using social and personality variables known to discriminate attitudes in other marital status groups as well as variables reflecting the unique experiences of widowhood. The subjects were 118 urban widows, aged 29-78. Over 40 potential attitude predictors were assessed in relation to Gump's sex role inventory and Spence & Helmreich's Attitudes Toward Women Scale. Results indicated that feminist attitudes occur most consistently among widows who are professionals, who live with someone else, who date, whose recreational interests change after the husband's death, who recall relatively unhappy marriages, who are dissatisfied with life, and who discount the importance of religion. (Author)

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Determinants of Widows' Attitudes Toward Women

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Determinants of Widows' Attitudes Toward Women

Despite the national impact of the Women's Liberation Movement in recent years, research investigating specific factors associated with changing attitudes toward women is scarce. A handful of reports have attempted to delineate the characteristics of activist women (Micossi, 1970; Stolof, 1973; Sangri & Alker, 1972). Others have examined the correlates of feminist attitudes in predominately non-activist samples, most often assessing a few demographic or life history variables and/or selected personality traits (Gump, 1972; Halas, 1974; Mason, Czajka & Arber, 1976; Tavris, 1973; Albright & Chang, 1976; Worrell & Worrell, 1977; Sanger & Alker, 1972; Favell, Cunningham & Green, 1977). The most consistent predictors of women's attitudes toward women which have emerged in these studies are education and religion, with feminist attitudes occurring more often among the better educated women, and among atheists, agnostics, Jews & Unitarians, than among those with less education, and among Catholics and Protestants. (See especially Dempewolff, 1974; Tavris, 1973; Porter & Albert, 1976, and Mason et al., 1977.)

Many of the samples in these studies are convenient groups of college students; consequently, most of the women subjects are young and single. The variables of age and marital status have received little attention, despite their intrinsic relevance to the content. The omission of older women in this research echoes their neglect by social scientists in other areas (Payne & Whittington, 1976). Their omission from research on this topic, however, seems patently unforgiveable. Even in the few studies where older women have been included (Fowler & Van de Riet, 1972; Fowler, Fowler & Van de Riet, 1973; Favel et al., 1977; Halas, 1974), age differences have seldom been

systematically investigated. In a relatively constricted young age sample, one study found negligible age differences (Tavris, 1973); another found a significant age difference (Gump, 1972).

Recent research findings suggest that the views of older women may be particularly intriguing. Doyle (1976) replicated a 1936 study of attitudes toward feminism among university students forty years later, and found more liberal attitudes in the current generation. Wells and Smeal (1974) studied women's propensity to support women political candidates and found reduced support associated with increasing age. However, the data revealed higher than expected support for women candidates among subjects over age 70. In addition to a life cycle hypothesis, they suggest a generational difference stemming from exposure to the feminist movement of the twenties by the oldest participants in their research.

As in the case of age, marital status has received little attention in research on women's attitudes toward women, even when this data is available (e.g., Fowler et al., 1973). A 1971 Harris poll (cited in Tavris, 1973) claimed more support for "the efforts to strengthen and change women's status in society" by divorced women, followed by single women and married women, and Porter & Albert (1976) found more liberal attitudes toward women's familial roles among single mothers than among married mothers. However, Tavris' (1973) study of Psychology Today readers found single women to be those in least support of the women's movement; no differences were found among the divorced, married and cohabitating groups.

While most researchers have studied the attitudes of single women (however inadvertently), several have studied married women (Halas, 1974; Favell et al., 1977). No study until the present one has specifically investigated the attitudes of widowed women.

There are a number of reasons why we might expect the attitudes of widows to be divergent from their married counterparts. In addition to the loss of many components of the role of wife, widowhood often results in a dramatic change in the woman's relationships with friends of both sexes, particularly those who are married (Barrett, 1977). The longer she is widowed, the more likely she is to become immersed in a network of same age peers who are also widowed. For both sexes widowhood also demands multiple new responsibilities previously assumed by the spouse because of sex role socialization (Barrett, 1978c; Lewis & Berns, 1975). Hence, their behavior is more likely to transcend traditional sex roles. Furthermore, the characteristic drop in income often produces a marked change in lifestyle.

Determination of the factors associated with diverse attitudes toward women in the widowed population might be important in sharpening predictions regarding their relationships with both men and women, their participation in social roles, and their political beliefs and potential political behavior (e.g., Wells & Smeal, 1974).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the determinants of attitudes toward women among a sample of widowed women of all ages, using social and personality variables explored in previous research with other marital status groups. In addition, variables reflecting the unique experiences of widowhood were included.

Method

Subjects The subjects were 118 urban widows ranging in age from 29 to 78. Their average length of widowhood was 5.5 years. The data for this research were obtained as part of a larger study of the prediction of affective and behavioral responses to bereavement (Barrett & Becker, 1978) undertaken in

conjunction with the development of therapeutic programs for widows (Barrett, 1978a). Subjects completed written questionnaires while in attendance at a group orientation meeting.

Dependent Variables Two research tools were used to assess the widows' attitudes toward women. One was Gump's (1972) sex role inventory, which yields seven attitudinal factors: 1) Identity Derived through Traditional Roles, 2) Woman's Role is Submissive, 3) Need for Individualistic Achievement and Satisfactions, 4) Home orientation and Duty to Children, 5) Traditional Role Implies Some Relinquishing of Needs for Personal Fulfillment, 6) Sense of Autonomy and Heightened Independence and 7) Family Inadequate to Completely Fulfill Needs. In addition, the composite factors called self-orientation (factors 3, 5,6, and 7) and other-orientation (factors 1, 2, and 4) were derived. Secondly, thirteen items were selected from Spence and Helmrich's (1972) Attitudes Toward Women Scale based on their relevance to widowhood. They were scored in the usual fashion and summed to yield a score reflecting radical versus conservative attitudes. Hence, ten separate measures of the dependent variable were available. Feminist beliefs are indicated by low other-orientation, high self-orientation, and radical attitudes toward women.

Independent Variables A total of forty two independent variables were included in the study. Fifteen were demographic variables suggested by previous research: age, number of children, the widow's occupation, her husband's occupation, the extent of her employment during marriage, total number of years employed, education, her husband's education, income prior to widowhood, present income, current living arrangement, religion, a measure of the importance of religion, political orientation, and a measure of political activity

(worked for candidate in previous election). In addition, the duration of marriage, previous experience with divorce, the duration of widowhood, and marital happiness were determined.

Three variables reflecting the widow's experience prior to bereavement were added: the cause of her husband's death (sudden, intermediate, or long-term illness), the degree of explicit preparation for widowhood, and the number of widowed friends known prior to the death.

Seventeen variables reflecting the woman's experience since becoming a widow were assessed: the current number of widowed friends, whether the widow confides in women friends, degree of change in her hobbies and recreational pursuits, the extent of relocation, loneliness, depression, a composite measure of the intensity of her grief, her current orientation to the past, the present, and the future, her involvement in the roles of mother, volunteer worker, and date, her desire for and expectation for remarriage, admiration for her deceased husband, and attitude toward widowhood.

Finally, three personality variables were included: Rotter's (1966) Locus of Control Scale, the Life Satisfaction Index A (Neugarten, Havighurst & Tobin, 1961) and Rosenberg's (1962) measure of self-esteem.

The relationships of the potential predictor variables to each of the measures of attitudes toward women were determined using Pearson's correlation or analysis of variance as appropriate.

Results

More than twice as many relationships were significant ($p < .05$) as would have been expected by chance. The number of attitudinal measures which were significantly associated with each of the predictor variables is presented in

Table 1. (Insert Table 1 about here). This is one gauge of the strength of their predictive value. Feminist attitudes occurred most consistently (at least three significant relationships in the same direction) among widows who are professionals, who live with someone else, who date, whose hobbies or recreational pursuits changed after the husband's death, who recall relatively unhappy marriages, and expecially those who are dissatisfied with life, and who discount the importance of religion.

Additional findings corroborated by relationships with two dependent measures are as follows. More conservative attitudes were expressed by older widows, those who admire their deceased husbands, those whose general political orientation is conservative, those who are internal in their locus of control, and those who spend more time thinking about the future. Intense grief was associated more with self-oriented attitudes and the belief that the traditional role of women requires personal sacrifice. However, identification with the traditional role was stronger among widows with the most intense grief. Involvement in the role of mother was associated with more other-oriented attitudes and denial of the view that the traditional role requires sacrifice. However, active mothers expressed greater need for autonomy and independence.

Examining those factors associated with only a single attitudinal measure, we find that both widows whose husbands died suddenly and those whose husbands died of long illnesses were more radical in their attitudes toward women than those whose husbands died of intermediate length illnesses. Those who reported better preparation for widowhood rejected the traditional female role. Religion also affected the widow's attitudes: the most radical were Jewish women, followed successively by atheists and "others", Protestants, and Catholics. Politically active widows were more likely to <u>disagree</u> that the traditional role

requires relinquishing their own needs. Both those with less current income and those who want to remarry admit less need to achieve on their own. Those who expect to remarry were more opposed to the view that the traditional role requires the relinquishing of personal needs. Those higher in self-esteem were less self-oriented in their attitudes; those who were depressed were more so.

A nonlinear relationship was observed between both the widow's and her husband's education and a single attitudinal measure, but in the case of the widow, the more liberal attitudes occurred at the extremes of the educational scale, whereas an intermediate level of the husband's education was associated with a more liberal point of view.

Seventeen independent variables failed to predict the widow's attitudes toward women (See Table 1). Among the negative findings of particular importance were that the extent of the widow's employment in marriage, the degree to which she confides in women friends, the number of prior or current widowed friends, and the length of her widowhood did not predict attitudes. Nor was the widow's loneliness or attitude toward widowhood related to her attitudes toward women.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that both basic demographic variables and variables reflecting the specific circumstances of a woman's experience of widowhood impinge on her attitudes toward women. Variables in both groups were about equally likely to predict feminist or traditional attitudes. Studies which focus on particular stages in the lives of women can enhance our understanding of how attitudes toward sex roles evolve and change over the life

span. The focus on young, single women in much of the previous research does not permit us to evaluate the endurance of specific relationships between background characteristics and women's attitudes toward other women.

A number of associations explored in prior research were confirmed in this study of widows, but the strength of specific predictions appears to be modified. The strongest demographic predictor was the importance of religion in the woman's life, which was more critical than her particular religious affiliation, although the same pattern of attitudes among the major religions found in younger samples was confirmed. Similarly, Stoloff (1973) found negligible involvement in religious activity in the families of origin of women's liberation group members relative to controls. Programs sponsored by organizations other than churches might be more effective in reaching feminist widows.

The widow's occupational status was a stronger determinant of her attitudes toward women than education, despite the importance of education in mediating diverse lifestyles in widowhood among older widows (Lopata, 1973). It may be that as life experiences in the employment arena are gained, formal education becomes a less salient avenue for exposure to ideas which promote a feminist persuasion. Previous studies suggest that the experience of job discrimination is particularly associated with feminism (Tavris, 1973; Wells & Smell, 1974). Age itself was a moderate predictor of attitudes toward women in this sample. Further research with older women in other marital status groups is needed.

The living arrangement of the widow was associated with different ideologies: those who lived alone were most conservative. Stein & Weston (1976)

found no relationship between the living arrangement of college women and their attitudes toward women.

Widows who recalled the happiest marriages were most conservative in their attitudes. Tavris (1973) did not find a strong relatipnship between global marital satisfaction and attitudes toward the Women's Liberation Movement in her younger married subjects.

The two strongest, consistent predictors of attitudes toward women among the variables assessing the widow's current experience were involvement in dating and change in hobbies or recreational pursuits. Since none of the variables reflecting the widow's experience with women friends was significantly related to feminism[1], it is particularly intriguing that those widows who were pursuing new relationships with men were more feminist in orientation. Given the marked discrepency in the number of "available" men and women, it may be that feminist values assisted these widows in asserting their own needs for intimacy, whereas the more passive stance of traditional women may have inhibited the development of relationships with men among those widows who desired them. Stoloff (1973) found that graduate women active in women's liberation groups had had more sexual experience and viewed themselves as more attractive to men than a control group of graduate students. McDaniel (1973) found more assertive behavior by college women during the initial dating stage of intimate relationships than in subsequent stages.

The personality correlates of attitudes toward women merit discussion. Based on their study of married women, Favell et al. (1977) propose that self-esteem may be associated with feminism in a complex manner. High self-esteem may be enjoyed by liberal women who have financial and educational resources at their command. However, liberal women whose situation handicaps

their ability to obtain greater autonomy may develop depressive tendencies. This second pattern appears to reflect the experience of women in this study. Feminist widows were consistently more dissatisfied with life, and reported lower self-esteem and more frequent depression.

Locus of control has been studied in several investigations of attitudes toward women held by younger subjects. Contrary to the results of this study, Maracek & Frasch (1977) found external control associated with conservative sex-role ideologies. Worrell and Worrell (1977) failed to find a difference in locus of control between student supporters and opponents of the Women's Liberation Movement. Sanger & Alker's (1972) factor-analytic study found feminist organization members to be more internal than controls in a "personal control" factor derived from the I-E Scale, but more external in a factor reflecting protestant ethic ideology.

Further studies should investigate the processes whereby beliefs about the roles of women change over time. A particular constellate of attitudes may propel the widow toward new experiences and lifestyles, which in turn may generate new perspectives. Even for the widow whose life is marked by isolation and diminished avenues for new experience, the loss of a long-term male intimate may necessitate a reevaluation of her beliefs concerning herself as a woman (see Lopata, 1973a.)

Since the duration of widowhood was not correlated with any measures of attitudes toward women, it is clear that whatever impact the death of one's husband has on one's attitudes, this impact is not uniform among widows. Substantial variance occurred in the attitudinal variables. It would be an error to classify widows as either traditional or radical in their beliefs about women. They are as diverse in this regard as they are in other respects,

and their individual behavior, feelings and interaction patterns are likely to be rich in complexity and to reflect multiple motivations.

Given this diversity, consider what the increased active participation of widows in the political system and in the women's movement might bring. The neglect of older women -- and widows by implication -- in both arenas is notable (e.g., Lewis & Butler, 1972; Gubrium, 1972). Yet the potential commitment of energy, resources, skills and support in this population is paramount. (Barrett, 1978b). Widows could bring their reservoirs of knowledge, expertise and compassion to bear on pressing social problems, and could inspire a reassessment and reallocation of resources as their own needs become articulated. In return, political movements could provide the widow a range of new roles and alternative modes of meaning, as she continues to make choices about her present and future life.

FOOTNOTES

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[1]However, Barrett (1978a) found an increase in feminist attitudes among widows who participated in small discussion groups with other widows.

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Table 1: Number of Dependent Measures Significantly Related to the Predictor Variables

Variables related to three or more dependent measures:

Occupation
Living arrangement
Importance of religion (4)
Marital happiness
Change in hobbies or recreational pursuits
Intensity of grief
Involvement in mother role
Involvement in dating
Life satisfaction (4)

Variables related to one dependent measure:

Education
Husband's education
Current income
Religion
Political activity
Cause of husband's death
Preparation for widowhood
Depression
Desire to remarry
Expect to remarry
Self-esteem

Variables related to two dependent measures:

Age
Political orientation
Orientation to future
Admiration of husband
Locus of control

Variables not related to any dependent measures:

Number of children
Husband's occupation
Extent of marital employment
Total years of employment
Income prior to widowhood
Duration of marriage
Duration of widowhood
Experience of Divorce
No. of widowed friends prior to widowhood
No. of current widowed friends
Confide in women friends
Relocation
Loneliness
Orientation to past
Orientation to present
Involvement in volunteer role
Attitude toward widowhood